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ABSTRACT

This paper develops the step-by-step processes necessary to conduct a communication audit in order to determine the communication effectiveness of an organization. The authors stress the responsibilities of both the audit team and the organization's top management as they interact during progressive phases of the audit. Emphasis is placed on initial contact and rapport building, the conduct of the audit, and its final analysis of communication effectiveness in an organization. The communication audit is described as a management tool, one that should be employed repeatedly to keep management alert to communication problems and the status of the organization's health. (Author)

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STEPS IN PERFORMING A COMMUNICATION AUDIT

by

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Abstract: This paper develops the step-by-step processes necessary to conduct a communication audit in order to determine the communication effectiveness of an organization. The authors stress the responsibilities of both the audit team and the organization's top management as they interact during progressive phases of the audit. Emphasis is placed on initial contact and rapport building, the conduct of the audit, and its final analysis of communication effectiveness in an organization. The communication audit is described as a management tool, one that should be employed repeatedly to keep management alert to communication problems and the status of the organization's health.

STEPS IN PERFORMING A COMMUNICATION AUDIT**

I. INTRODUCTION

As managerial thought has evolved, the result has been the continual redefinition, expansion, and description of a growing number of functions identified as responsibilities of the modern manager (Wren, 1972). According to many management professionals (Miner, 1973; Weisman, 1974), the manager today is responsible not only for facilitating effective and efficient operation of each functional area, but also for insuring their timely and continual mutually supportive interrelation within an organization.

Nearly 70 years ago Frederick W. Taylor, the founder of the school of scientific management, identified the primary functions of a manager as: planning, organizing, controlling, scientifically selecting the right man for the right job, and facilitating cooperation between employee and employer (Miner, 1973). Since that time, the conception of management has enlarged Taylor's list of functions to include: planning, organizing, staffing, coordinating,

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**This paper is based on a research report submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements in the course Interpersonal Communication 746: "Communication Process in Organizations" conducted during the Winter Quarter, 1975, School of Interpersonal Communication, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio. Participants in the research were: Robert Edmunds, Craig Harter, R. A. Iglowski, Craig Inabnet, John Nolan, Jean Rahrig, C. E. Tapie Rohm, Jr., William Rossiter, Geraldine Simone, Leah Vaughan, Holly Ann Wellstead, Dudley A. Williams, and James W. Wright.

controlling, investigating, communicating, formulating goals and objectives, directing, motivating, evaluating, innovating, decision-making, listening, and administering (Koontz & O'Donnell, 1964; Redding, 1972; Drucker, 1974).

Associated with the widening scope of managerial functions has been an increasing awareness that communication is a key function among the others, and is, in fact, the "linkage" binding the other functions (Haimann & Scott, 1970; Weisman, 1974). As that linkage, communication is depicted as having the objective of interrelating and providing the mutual support among the other functions within an organization.

As the significance of the communicative function emerges, common sense and logic indicate that management must accept the inherent responsibility to become personally involved with communication activities (Townsend, 1965; Weisman, 1969). The effectiveness of an organization's communication is directly related to implicit and explicit organizational objectives and accomplishment of the organizational mission (Redding & Sanborn, 1964). The very important relationship among managerial functions is allowed and provided for through communicative activity and the resultant organizational cohesiveness.

In the past, top management through its supervision and direct involvement in selective functional areas, has initiated studies, inquiries, reviews, financial audits, or analyses to determine organizational problem areas. Unfortunately, such investigations usually focused upon the dominantly

recognized managerial functions and excluded communication. When communication appeared to be involved in the area of scrutiny, then the communication activity was included within the scope of the study, but generally only as a component or sub-element of the more traditional system. Since the proper instrumentation to conduct research in, on, or about communication systems had not been developed and refined, communication was the lesser part of any particular analysis.

Only recently has a technique begun to be developed and tested to permit thorough and accurate evaluation of the effectiveness of communication systems and activities within the organization. The technique is the communication audit. Previously, managers used questionnaires, interviews, administrative logs, flow-charts, ECCO analysis, card sorts, participant-observation, content analyses, or any number of research techniques adapted to investigate separate functions and their particular problems. While any of these research techniques can be used to determine communication variables within an organization, until the recent advent of the communication audit, no single integrated and standardized procedure had been developed. Partial approaches generally focused on previously discovered problems and their impact. Seldom did these approaches address either the effectiveness of the organization's communication climate as a whole, separately, or by component. The currently developing communication audit technique provides a sophisticated approach for the capability of determining communication effectiveness.

This paper reviews current knowledge of the procedures

for preparing for and conducting a communication audit so that managers, management, and outside consultants can become aware of the audit as a key supportive activity, how it is accomplished, and what benefits develop from its proper use.

The concept of the communication audit is explained best through a schematic (see Figure 1) which depicts the stages of the audit from initiation to completion. The flow chart and accompanying text address the communication specialist since he, either as a member of the particular organization, or as a member of an outside organization specializing in audit services, must obtain the permission and support of top management in an organization, conduct the audit, and evaluate data obtained.

The schematic traces the major steps from inception to conclusion of the audit: introductory contacts between the auditor and management, the conduct of the audit, and final evaluations of communication effectiveness as revealed by the audit. Comments are general, since no two organizations are identical, and as such will require some special planning and tailoring of the audit. Both auditor and client must be able to conceptualize the audit within the special areas and environmental characteristics of the respective organizations.

Figure 1. Schematic - Communication Audit

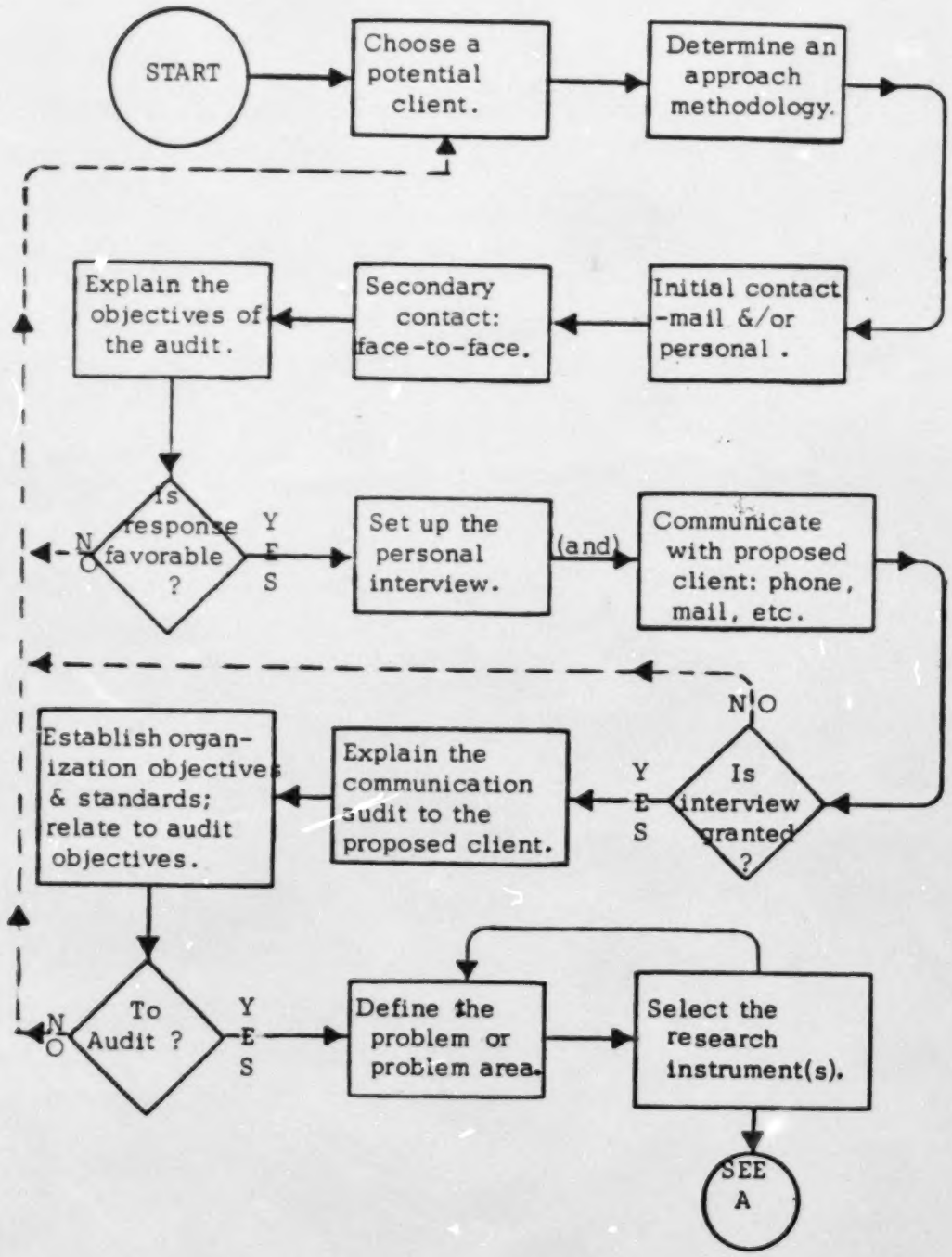
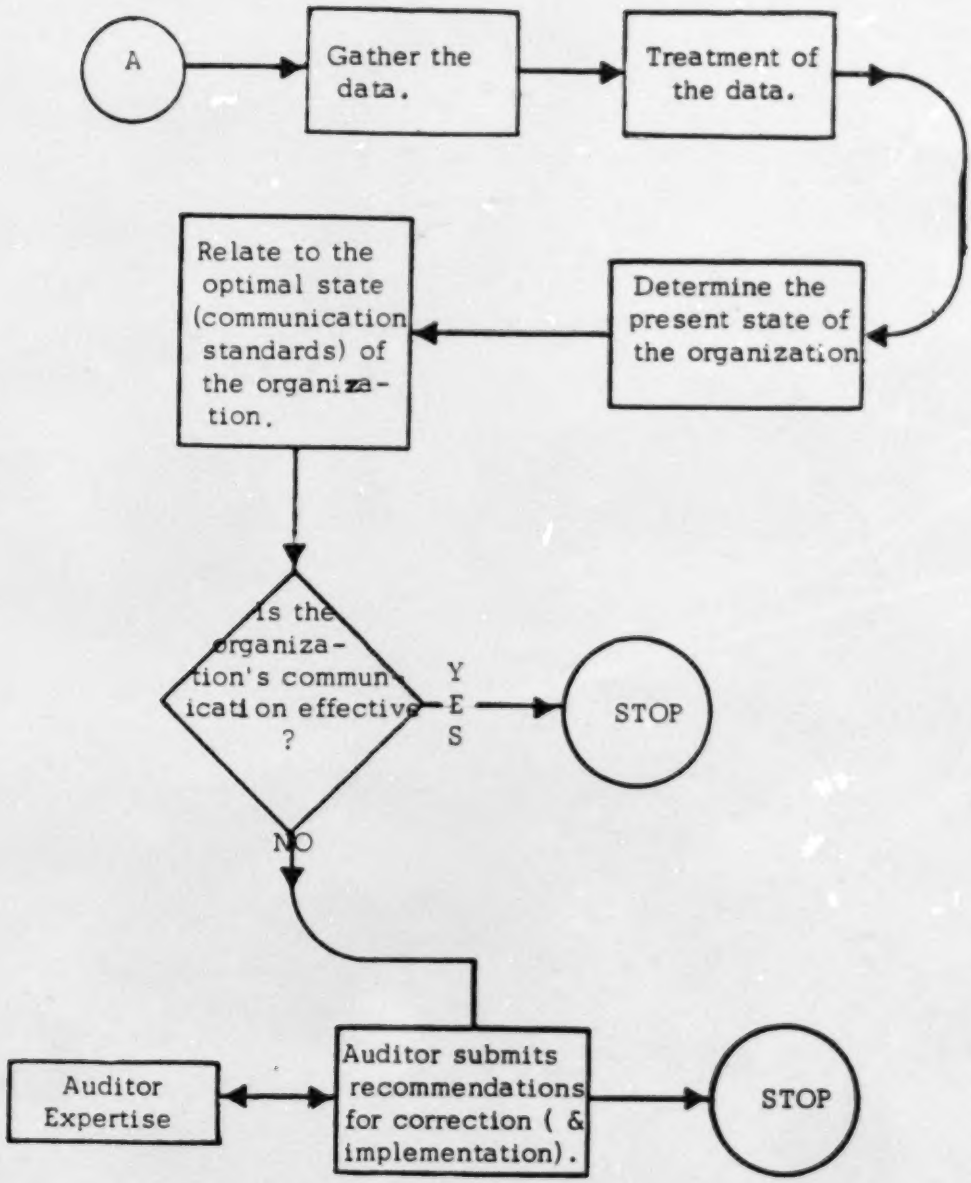


Figure 1. Schematic - Communication Audit (continued)



II. APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEMS

Choosing the Potential Client

To establish potential target markets for implementation of the communication audit, consideration of several factors is necessary. They include: (a) Determination of any restrictions to be placed on the market; for instance, if the target market encompasses an industrial, governmental, or religious organization, an essential requirement is to identify the specific levels and communication activities that the audit will address. Legal and political considerations must also be included in selection criteria if these pose operational constraints within which the audit must be conducted. (b) Establishment of restrictions as to size, geographical location, industrial limitations, or number of employees. (c) Clearly establishing the relationship between the term "communication"/"communication audit" and the organization(s) under consideration. (d) Establishment of an operational definition for the terms communication and communication audit. Attending to the criteria above will facilitate the selection of target markets, or of those segments of the available population with which the communication audit will be concerned.

Determining Approach Methodology

Upon the selection of a prospective client and a particular segment of the client population, a final decision must be made concerning what initial approach(es) will be taken to reach him. Alternatives include: contact through

advertisement mail and/or brochures containing an attractive outline of the proposed audit; telephone; interview; personal appearance; referral; or, any combination of the above. The financial cost of contact incurred by the auditor should be considered, however, before any meaningful decision along these lines is implemented.

Secondary Contact

Due to the lack of any established contact at the outset, the initial contact is a critical step in the entire contact/sell approach in the audit business. Therefore, in the secondary contact, care should be taken to expand on the theme which was utilized in the approach campaign, e.g., if a brochure were received by the prospective client, the auditor, in his follow-up contact, would take care to provide supplementary information about the materials received. Additionally, he would expand the concept, definition, and operational procedure of the communication audit. Obviously, this is the marketing phase of the operation, since failure to impress the organizational management is likely to elicit an unfavorable response.

Explaining the Objectives of the Communication Audit

A communication audit must have objectives. An important part of the sales promotion of the pre-audit phase is the establishment of objectives in a clear, concise manner to which management can relate. Several objectives for conducting a communication audit are: (a) assessing the effectiveness of the organizational communication system: (b) mapping the

communication flows within an organization; (c) pin-pointing weak and/or undesirable areas in the system; (d) ascertaining whether or not the appropriate elements are present within the existing organizational structure; (e) assembling information through data gathering instruments, in order to measure and compare that information within standards previously set by the organization; and, (f) developing recommendations for the correction of apparent deficiencies and preparing plans for implementation of these recommendations.

Is Response Favorable?

If the response from the prospective client is unfavorable, then the auditor must begin the whole process again, i.e., repeat the initial and secondary contact procedures.

Setting Up the Personal Interview and the Communication Form Used

If the response from the prospective client is favorable, then the auditor needs to set up an interview in order to explain what a communication audit is, and how it will benefit the particular organization. Several alternatives are suggested to set up the personal interview: a personal telephone call, a letter, a face-to-face interaction, referral, or any combination thereof.

Is the Interview Granted?

If the interview is not granted, this would necessitate starting at the beginning of the diagrammed procedure.

Once the appointment for the interview is arranged, the

auditor should intensify his research of the organization (i.e., obtain general knowledge of it, perhaps through its public financial statement, annual report, and/or any published listing of a given organization's characteristics), and establish his approach for the interview, before the next contact can be made. Preparation for this sales interview requires a complete analysis of the client organization. Since this interview determines whether or not permission is granted to conduct the audit, the client must be convinced of the need for, and benefits derived from the audit, along with the compatability of organizational objectives and those of the audit. How well the auditor analyzes the particular organization and the problem, will largely determine his chance for success in the coming interview. This is the critical point where all excellent principles of interviewing should be appropriately chosen and executed (Goyer, Redding, & Rickey, 1968).

Explaining the Communication Audit

Answers to the following questions should be provided by the auditor: What is the communication audit? What can a communication audit do for the organization in question to help identify and solve some of its problems? How can a communication audit check for potential problems in the organization?

Goldhaber (1974) explained: "A communication audit is a research procedure which assesses the effectiveness of the organizational communication system according to a set of standards." When explaining the audit, the auditor should

include mention of areas where communication problems are frequently encountered: horizontal (Townsend, 1965), vertical (Chase, 1970), and diagonal communication (Hulbert & Capon, 1972); the grapevine (Davis, 1961); bypassing, allness, and frozen evaluation (Haney, 1967); and, specific formal and informal communication patterns (Bavelas & Barrett, 1951).

Showing Alignment of Organizational Objectives With Audit Objectives and Establishing Standards

As the interview takes place, the auditor should elicit management's organizational objectives and determine what are the organization's communication standards. At this time a joint decision is made by client and auditor to proceed with the audit.

Definition of the Problem

At this stage in the pre-communication audit strategy, attention is directed toward identification of specific area(s) within the organization to be audited through specially selected instruments and methods chosen by the audit team (auditor and associates).

Within this framework, further definition of the problem occurs. Having some idea of the number and classification of employees who will be informants in the audit will allow for further specification of instruments and techniques useful in obtaining the information desired. Should the focus of the audit be in a production department, for example, only foreman might be made aware of the presence of an audit team, and a participant observer will be used to collect data. If

the informants are vice-presidents or directors perhaps an information-giving interview should be chosen as one means of gathering data. Because many types of information-gathering devices are used in communication auditing, the audit team should have some knowledge of the number and types of employees who will be serving as informats in the study in order to select the most appropriate methods and instruments.

In addition to numerical and geographic information, the audit team must also be aware of the current communication climate within the area involved (Redding, 1966; Hunt, 1972; Dennis, 1974). Whether or not the atmosphere is one that would facilitate or hinder honest open communication is an extremely important factor in determining the methods to be used for information gathering (Sincoff, 1969). Tensions and jealousies must be taken into consideration in an analysis of communication climate. Previous exposure to communication surveys and reactions to them by the client sample are appropriate data to obtain.

III. SELECTION OF THE INSTRUMENTS

Following definitions of the audit objectives, the auditor should select the data gathering instrument(s), a process involving three phases: (1) determination of the instrument's relevance to a particular purpose; (2) estimation of cost factors (temporal and monetary) which are involved in using the particular instrument; and, (3) evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of each instrument.

Since a variety of data gathering instruments are available, the auditor has to decide which ones will provide the desired information about the problem under study. The auditor should determine the scientific usefulness of the instrument considered, i.e., its reliability and validity. Since many instruments (commercially prepared questionnaires) neither consistently nor accurately measure the constructs they purport to measure, determining reliability and validity of the instrument becomes a critical step. Relative cost factors must be considered when determining the extent to which reliability and validity need to be demonstrated.

Having narrowed the selection of data gathering instruments, the auditor compares the strengths and weaknesses of the remaining instruments by looking for answers to the following questions: (a) Can the instrument be easily used? (b) Is it objectively scored? (c) Is it available for use? (d) Is it easily explained? Some common weaknesses of which the auditor should be aware are: biased or leading questions, subjectivity in scoring, and data which are subject to only

unfamiliar forms of statistical procedures. These and other comparisons will lead the auditor to choose the optimum data gathering instruments.

Although many instruments can be employed in the communication audit, most of them are representative of one of the three major types of data gathering techniques: the questionnaire, the interview, and observation. Since the auditor needs to be familiar with all three if he desires proficiency in his task, they are explained here briefly.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire is a written instrument which attempts to secure information concerning an individual's attitudes, knowledge, and perceptions on a particular topic or activity. In most cases, the questionnaire is self-administered--the individual providing information completes the questionnaire without assistance from the auditor.

The ease with which the questionnaire is administered is one of its main advantages. Other inherent advantages are its flexibility, low cost, the wide variety of information obtainable, and the relatively short period of time necessary for its administration.

The major disadvantages of the questionnaire include low, unrepresentative return rates (especially for mailed questionnaires), biased responses due to inadequate alternative responses or leading questions, and difficulty in coding open-ended questions. Often the questionnaires tend to incorporate cultural biases especially in language use.

To guard against these problems, the following precautions should be taken during the construction of the questionnaire: (a) the respondent's identity should be anonymous, (b) items included should be free of bias, and (c) there should be only one way to interpret the question asked in each item.

The Interview

The interview ". . . is the most powerful and useful tool of social scientific society research" (Kerlinger, 1973, p. 412). Essentially, the interview is "a form of oral communication involving two parties, at least one of whom has a preconceived and serious purpose, and both of whom speak and listen from time to time" (Goyer, Redding & Rickey, 1968, p. 6). Although many authors make little distinction between the questionnaire and the interview, there are some important differences.

The interview is much more versatile than the questionnaire. In addition to serving as the main instrument of the research, the interview also functions as an explanatory device as well as a supplemental aid to other research methods. Moreover, the interview has the distinct advantage of being an immediate and direct communication exchange between the parties involved. While this format enables the interviewee to explain his answers more fully, it gives the interviewer insight into both the conscious and preconscious attitudes, beliefs, and preceptions of the respondent.

Besides having certain advantages over the questionnaires

the interview also possesses some disadvantages not found in the questionnaire, specifically (1) it requires a great deal of time and money; and (2) bias can result from the interaction between the parties and/or subjective interpretation of the informant's responses by the interview. An auditor experienced in the various approaches and techniques of interviewing, can eliminate (or at least minimize) some of the interview's weaknesses.

Observation Methodology

The third overall methodology useful in the communication audit is observation. It is "collecting information-in-society first-hand by maintaining alert attention, with maximum use of the observer's complement of perceptual abilities and sensitivities, to all the accessible and relevant interpersonal and intrapersonal events going on in the immediate field situation through a period of time" (Junker, 1960, p. 14). The phases of the observation technique are: (a) observing, (b) recording, and (c) analyzing.

In the observational phase, achieving and adapting to the situation are crucial to the methodology. The establishment of rapport is important throughout the course of the audit, first to enter the organization, and second to maintain cooperation from its members. Rapport between the observer and the observed influences the quality of data which are obtained, since the person observed will not behave in his usual manner unless he trusts the observer. Achieving rapport is an ongoing process that necessitates the observer's concern

with dress, nonverbal symbols, intimacy of relations, conformity, eavesdropping, and revealing information about the audit to be observed.

Adaptations are essential to the maintenance of rapport and by extension, to the success of the study, i.e., characteristics of the person being observed who would assure the success or failure of gathering observation data. Adaptation to the environment discourages contamination of observation and encourages social interaction. Cues given by the observed guide the observations of the observer and prepare him for role adjustments or unanticipated events. Such flexibility in approach is a major advantage of observation methodology. Another advantage is that the auditor not only observes the actual communication patterns of specific individuals, but also has the opportunity to question them about their behavior as soon as it occurs.

The major disadvantage of this methodology is that it tends to disrupt the normal activities and functions of the individuals being observed. Thus, the observed behaviors are not necessarily routine behaviors, but possibly reactions to the presence of the observer, a form of the Hawthorne effect. A further disadvantage of observation is that the observer is limited to the number of places in which he can be at one time to observe, and by the number of detailed observations he can make. The technique is also time consuming and the accuracy of observations is contingent upon rapport establishment. In addition, lack of attention to the situation, and

subjectivity in data interpretation are problems inherent to observation methodology.

IV. APPLICATION OF TECHNIQUES

Once selected, the auditor has to decide how he wants to employ the research instruments. This decision requires the auditor to examine the operational factors or procedures inherent in the use of a particular research method. The term operational factors, refers to the mechanics involved in using each instrument. Since each instrument has its own operational factors, attention is focused here on the three principle information gathering categories: the questionnaire, the interview, and observation.

If a questionnaire is going to be included as part of the audit, some operational procedures to be considered are administration, time, and collection. Administration consists of determining (a) whether the questionnaire is self-administering, (b) whether the directions are easy to follow, (c) if the items apply to all respondents, (d) whether the respondents have to take the test at the same time or location, and (e) if special instruments such as lead pencils are needed to complete the form. Time encompasses both the completion and scoring of the questionnaire. Finally, the auditor investigates the procedures involved in collecting the questionnaire. One method of collection requires the auditor to retrieve each form personally. While assuring a high return rate, it is also very time consuming. An alternative method permits the respondents to return the questionnaire to stations conveniently located. Unfortunately, the percentage rate of return declines sharply when this procedure is employed.

V. TREATMENT OF THE DATA

Beyond the cursory discussion of data treatment specifically designed for each instrument, the auditor should be aware of the general steps in data treatment while maintaining alertness to his purpose: he is seeking a frequency of occurrence, percentage of the total, difference between groups, average of time or number, pictorial representation of a process, or illustrative details. This, in turn, will determine if the data he gathered must be qualitative--such as flow-chart, nondirective interview, or sociometric technique analyses--quantitative, such as a highly structured questionnaire elicts.

The auditor must also determine if his data are categorical: can they be portioned into appropriate classes? Often qualitative data can be converted into quantitative units for analysis through such categorization. Generally, the more highly structured the research instruments, the more easily classifiable are the data obtained.

In constructing categories, the auditor should keep the following rules in mind: (a) Categories are set up according to the research problem; (b) The categories are exhaustive; (c) The categories are mutually exclusive and independent; (d) Each category is derived from one classification principle; (e) Any categorization scheme must be one level of discourse (Kerlinger, 1973, p. 137). Another rule which might be added is that it is usually better to have too many separate categories which can be combined at a later date, than too few (Madge, 1953, p. 259).

Similar procedural decisions have to be made when the interview is used in the communication audit; the auditor again analyzes the administrative and time factors involved, deciding what approach he will use--directive or nondirective. He also selects his informants and determines the sequence in which they will be interviewed. Depending on whom he interviews, the auditor also decides if he needs to modify his appearance or language so that it will be more compatible with that of the interviewee. Finally, the auditor must also determine the best physical location for the interview.

If the auditor selects observation methodology to supplement other data gathering techniques, he still has to make some decisions before taking on the role of an observer: (1) he decides at which sub-unit in the organization he will begin, (2) he selects the type of observation best suited to his purpose--be it participant observation, observer as participant, or complete participant; (3) he finds the most subtle and effective way of recording the observed behavior; and, (4) he considers how much time needs to be spent in collecting information.

Having evaluated the operational factors of the instrument he intends to use, the auditor has to examine the environmental factors particular to the organization under study. Upon completion of this task, the auditor applies his instrument, gathers his data, and treats it using the appropriate analytical method.

Once the data have been categorized, the form of statistical presentation is determined. The simplest

and most commonly used type of statistical presentation is frequency distribution, or the number of cases or distribution of cases falling into different categories. Primary presentation is descriptive, while secondary analysis consists of comparing frequencies and percentages.

Often the auditor may wish to present a visual representation on the data gathered. Graphs, tables, and figures are especially helpful here. For information on their construction and uses, one may refer to available style manuals.

VI. EVALUATION OF COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVENESS

Determine Present State of the Organization

Having analyzed the data, the auditor looks for patterns, familiar elements, relationships, and trends which they show, making inferences about the state of the organization at the present time. The second step is to determine the optimal state of the organization.

Optimal State of the Organization

Information about the optimal state of the organization is derived from the organization's statements of its objectives (regarding the ideal or desired state of the organization's communication and obtained in the initiative and secondary contact interviews).

Is Present State Optimal?

The third step in audit evaluation is the actual comparison of the present state of the organization as determined by the audit, with the optimal state as determined in the pre-audit inquiries. This phase requires the auditor to compare the data he has collected and the conclusions he has drawn from them with the statements made by his organizational contact persons regarding its desired state or standard of communication. If the auditor determines that the present state of the organization is in line with the organization's optimal state, then no further work is necessary.

Making Recommendations

If the auditor determines that the present state of the organization fails to meet the communication standards of the client, then he may make recommendations proposing ways that the organization can achieve its goals and objectives through corrective action of communicative behavior.

Expertise of the Auditor

In making recommendations, the auditor draws on his own knowledge, training and experience. He is, for example, aware of specific techniques that may be employed to alleviate certain communication problems. He knows of communication and organizational models whose application may prove helpful to the client. Furthermore, he has acquired experience in applying certain methods in real life situations, and is expected to know how well or to what extent those methods have worked in the past. The auditor should bring to bear on the problem the sum total of his knowledge and experience.

VII. CONCLUSION

The auditor must be thoroughly trained and experienced in understanding the communication characteristics of organizations. He must develop an understanding of the organizational characteristics of the firm being considered for an audit. Repeated contacts, primarily of a face-to-face nature between audit personnel and top management representatives, are mandatory to establish the foundations for thorough and mutual understanding. Optimum planning must be an objective of both parties. Data must be evaluated against communication standards previously set by the organization and not the audit team. Top management's support of the audit and announcement interest must be evident from the initial contact through completion.

The communication audit is relatively new to the management environment and while any given audit will be tailored to fit any organization, there will be universalities which lend themselves to all organizations.

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